

South park as parody of society

[Media](#), [Television](#)



South Park began airing in 1997. The commercials that preceded it gave the impression of it being another stupid cartoon; however, when I began watching, I realized important issues were being covered through the repeated behaviors and actions of its characters, through the influences these actions could have on the viewers, through the reinforcement and rejections of certain stereotypes, through the long-term effects that could result from watching the program, and through its reflection of social reality.

Some of the repeated behaviors and actions of the characters include one of the children (Kenny) dying during each episode (followed by Stan yelling, "Oh, my God! They've killed Kenny" (South Park)); the children ragging the overweight kid; the African-American chef obsessing about sex; and the geneticist performing insane experiments in his spooky laboratory. Kenny has been shot, run over by a train, impaled on a flag pole, beheaded, crushed by Mir, and taken by Death himself--to name a few. Cartman, the overweight kid, has been called "fat ass," "lard ass," and "the fat kid" (South Park).

There are numerous references to his weight throughout each episode; he eats continuously, thanks to his Mother's cooking and offering cookies, chocolate-chicken pot pies, and Cheesy Poofs. Each time Chef (voice of Isaac Hayes) offers to explain important issues to the kids, he breaks into a song about making "sweet love" to a woman. This leaves the children wondering just what the heck he is trying to say. There are references to his having sex with every available (and even unavailable) female in the town. There is a take-off of The Island of Dr.

Moreau with a geneticist--mimicking Marlon Brando--conducting bizarre experiments: creating monkeys with four asses; creating mutant, militant turkeys; and bringing flesh-eating zombies to life. There are both negative and positive influences these repeated behaviors and actions could have on an audience. One negative effect could be the numbing of the viewer to children's deaths: it is such a common occurrence on the show until it is expected. Another effect could be the instilling of negative feelings toward the overweight; the audience could be learning that it is acceptable to verbally attack a person with a weight problem.

Also, in a time of AIDS, promotion of sexual promiscuity is a dangerous thing: never have the writers mentioned the use of condoms by Chef during his encounters. Finally, because of the recent advances in genetic research and its awakening of new fears in the public, South Park's parody of the geneticist could further play on people's fears. Despite the potentially negative influences of these behaviors and actions, there could be a positive influence existing in the form of catharsis.

American society has suffered from the rules of political correctness, the fear of AIDS, and the fear of knowledge (the fear of going too far into God's domain--thanks to our Puritanical background). Maybe South Park gives us release from repression by allowing us to laugh at the things we fear the most: death, ridicule of our differences by our peers, the contracting of deadly diseases, and advancements in science. (I am sure that most of us need release from the built-up tensions of daily life; South Park has given us this release. Despite South Park's cathartic influence, it reinforces several

negative stereotypes: the promiscuous African-American male, the self-serving public official, and the gun-happy redneck. As I wrote above, Chef has little control over his libido; this is an extremely negative stereotype of the African-American male. If Chef were Caucasian (let us say an Irish-English-German-Swedish-Scottish-etc-American), the stereotype could be avoided entirely. The mayor's decisions are based solely on her looking good in the public eye.

For example, when a volcano erupts, she uses fake concern for the children on the mountain to look like a caring person on Entertainment Tonight; she calls for continuous re-takes even though ET is broadcasting live. Uncle JimBo and Ned are the gun-toting Bubba types; when they take the kids on a camping trip, they get drunk and shoot at will. JimBo's philosophies are, " hunting without drinking is like fishing," and " thanks to those damned Democrats, we can only shoot certain animals that impose a threat; therefore, when you see an animal, you have to yell, 'it's comin' right for us'; then you shoot" (South Park).

At least one episode attempted to reject a negative stereotype: homosexuality is a bad thing. Stan's dog, Sparky, turns out to be gay. Throughout the episode we hear the evils of homosexuality preached by the town's people; Sparky runs away. Stan realizes that his love for his dog is more important than society's negative views. Stan is counted on to win the big football game. He does not show up because he is searching for his dog (YES! What a message: football does not fit highly in the great scheme of things. He finds Sparky at Big Gay Al's " Big Gay Animal Sanctuary" and

brings him home. Stan shares his newfound understanding with the citizens, and they accept his view. All the gay pets return from Al's to be with their owners. The owners apologize for being so narrow minded. This episode's message is quite profound. The gay episode is one episode which may be obvious in its message and is quite easy to grasp; however, the long-term effects from watching this program could go in two directions.

First, there is the possibility that children (and adults) watching this show would imitate the bad language and sometimes antisocial behaviors of the characters without realizing the important subtexts of the episodes. For example, Kyle is labeled a " fecal-phile" in the Christmas episode. He has a friend he calls Mr. Hankey. Mr. Hankey comes out of the toilet to bring Christmas cheer to all the little Jewish boys. Unfortunately, Mr. Hankey is a piece of feces, and as he dances around, he leaves marks on the walls, floor, and sink; he, also, writes " NOEL" on the bathroom mirror.

Of course, Kyle's parents blame Kyle--they do not believe in Mr. Hankey. Kyle is institutionalized for " fecal-philia. " Here, the problem could be kids thinking that it is cool to be in love with your own feces and cool to share it with others. They could miss the message found in the subtext: the fact that political correctness has gotten out of hand. This episode allows the inhabitants of South Park to express their dislikes over every aspect of Christmas--mainly, that each person's rights are being infringed upon by someone else's beliefs.

The political correctness is what drives Kyle to his belief in Mr. Hankey, not the fun of playing in his own filth. Second, the audience could grasp the

subtexts in these episodes and come to terms with their own morals and belief systems. There is a line spoken by Lex Luthor in Superman that makes good sense: " A man can read War and Peace and come away believing it is a simple adventure story; another man can read the ingredients on a chewing gum wrapper and unlock the secrets of the universe" (Superman).

The fact is that South Park is out there; it is ultimately our responsibility to make of it what we will. It may be our responsibility to do with South Park what we will; however, this program reflects what already exists: " a society full of prejudices and fears which are embedded within its communities and how these human short-comings are passed on to children"(Hatley).

Fortunately, in most of the episodes these negative actions and beliefs are dealt with in a manner that seeks to alleviate them. Unfortunately, this manner of alleviation is found in the subtext, and most people are not willing to look that far; it requires too much effort. Frighteningly, the show is a parody of society itself. In film, parody is usually the death-knell of a particular genre. Years ago, I read that Ren and Stimpy (another cartoon) was proof of the decline of our civilization because of its attacks on societal norms. " Could South Park be further proof of this decline, or is it just a funny cartoon that allows us to laugh at ourselves while dealing with our fears? "(Pineda)